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School Administrators as Change Agents; A Role Dilemma.

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The administrator's role in the change process is not all clear. Role conflict has been a barrier to administrators acting as change agents. Although the functions of executive, leader, maintainer, and policy implementer are common to most administrators, the total dimensions of administrative roles are seldom laid out in any job description. The school administrator can react to change in three different ways--ignore it, react to its operational effects, or stay ahead of it. Everett Rogers constructed a time continuum for the adoption of new ideas ranging between the extremes "laggards" and "innovators." Richard Carlson reveals three fundamental barriers to change in public schools--absence of a change agent, a weak knowledge base, and domestication of the public schools. He notes that the administrator receives the change agents role by default. Thus a vacuum is created in the management of change, for most administrators do not enjoy the luxury of detachment from their organization and cannot assume the risks involved in innovation adoption. Recently, teacher militancy and student activism have shifted the opportunity to initiate change from administrators to teachers and students, who can both detach themselves from the school organization and assume the risks of innovation adoption. (HW)

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AS CHANGE AGENTS;

A ROLE DILEMMA

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by

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School administrators engage in many indoor sports. Among the more challenging professional games are teacher-board negotiations, balancing budgets, writing proposals for the U.S.office, confronting militant students, and serving as agents of change. These games are challenging because the rules change without explicit notice and administrative survival frequently turns on clairvoyance more than wisdom. To discuss the administrator's role as a change agent may be an exercise in futility, particularly if the topic is cast in the declarative rather than the interrogative. There are reasons to doubt that school administrators can serve as change agents in their own schools because of the conflicting demands of the two roles.

School administrators are variously cast as executive officers or agents of the school board, education leaders in the schools, and maintainers of the school organization. The total dimensions of administrative roles seldom are laid out in any job description, but the functions of executive, leader, maintainer, and policy implementator are common to most administrators. Successful school administrators are expected to manage change in the schools, and, in our times, we equate change with innovation.

Lazarsfeld identified four tasks common to administrators in all organizations. One of the four tasks was the need to build into his organization provisions for innovations, for change, and for development.[1] The conditions for change must be built into the organization so that innovation

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1 Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Social Sciences and Administration: A Rationale", in The Social Sciences and Educational Admin istration, p.4. Edited by Lorne Downey and Frederick Enns. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1963.

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adoption and change management are orderly processes rather than disruptive, traumatic threats to the organization. Cunningham and Nystrand, in an effort to translate the divine qualities sought in superintendents into the profane realities, look for a middle ground.[2] In describing the superintendent's task of innovation-maintenance, they noted:[3]

> "It's fashionable today to define the role of the superintendent as that of change agent or innovator. In reality, though, the most creative of superintendents can probably devote no more than a small fraction of his time to changing his school system. The greater proportion of his work must be devoted to understanding his system, helping it to focus upon its purposes and directing the accomplishment of its programs. It's not a simple task; he can err in either of two extremes. On the one hand he can fail to recognize changing needs within the school system and allow it to atrophy or die from internal malfuction. On the other, he can over-react to forces outside the system and institute change to the point of turmoil and chaos. The successful superintendent must find a middle road".

Carlson defined a change agent as "a person who attempts to influence the adoption decisions in a direction he feels is desirable".[4] In his review of the barriers to change in public schools, Carlson noted the absence of a change agent other than the superintendent. The question before us is simply "are the administrative and change agent roles compatible or contradictory?"

Given the need to manage change and given the fact of change, what posture can the school administrator take toward it? There are several options: (1) do nothing abount change (ignore it); (2) react to operational effects of change (in a positive or negative fashion; or (3) stay ahead of change through planned initiation, accommodation, and ordered response to it. Option one is

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[2] Luvern L.Cunningham and Raphael O. Nystrand, "The Search for Strength in Local School Leadership", The American School Board Journal,155:10,pp 8-11, April,1968.

[3] Ibid, p.9.

[4] Richard O.Carlson, "Barriers to Change in Public Schools, "Change Processes in the Public Schools, University of Oregon: The Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, 1965, p.4.

clearly absurd. To ignore change in schools is to play a latter-day Canute. He couldn't hold back the tides by command; neither can administrators hold back change by ignoring it. Option two may reflect the wishful thought that educational change can be managed, ex post facto, by memorandum or by committee. More likely, option two reflects our schoolhouse tradition of "muddling through, come what may". Whether we see change in education as "incremental change" or "fundamental change" as described by Lindblom,[5] the reactive approach leaves the schools at the mercy of unpredictable tides and reduces the response to traumatic events rather than orderly processes. A casual review of the history of educational change encourages our search for a third alternative.

Innovation is a term of art, not one of science. Innovation means nothing in the abstract; to get meaning, we must translate the term into concrete events, processes, structures, and effect on people, organizations, and outputs. If we accept the notion that innovation is a fact of educational life, we must concern ourselves with innovators in the schools. Rogers defines innovators as " ...the first members of a social system to adopt new ideas."[6] In a recent analysis published by the Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, he noted that the adoption time for new ideas approximated the bell-shaped distribution curve.[7] Two standard deviations left of the mean adoption time were the 2.5% avant-garde adopters; one standard deviation to the right were the 16% laggards. Between these extremes, Rogers identified the "early adopters" (13.5%, one standard deviation to two standard deviations to the left of the mean), the "early majority" (one standard deviation to the right of the

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[5] Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through'", Public Administration Review, XIX (Spring, 1959) 79-88.

[6] Everett M. Rogers, "What are Innovators Like?" Change Processes in the Public Schools, University of Oregon: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, 1965, p.55.

[7] Ibid., p.56

mean on the adoption-time continuum.[8] If one accepts Rogers' findings, the value judgment as to where a school system or its administrators prefer to be on the adoption scale becomes relevant. Despite lip-service to the glories of school district leadership, administrative behavior usually reflects a more cautious, wait-and-see operating syndrome. Quite obviously, all school districts cannot lead; in fact, many districts are well-advised to avoid the temptation.

Innovation-adoption is a high-risk endeavor. The cost of adoption may be too high in money, public relations, staff harmony, and organizational stability for many districts. The local pay-off may be too low if the innovation succeeds and the loss too great if it doesn't. Rogers' description of innovators and laggards points up the educational economies of the innovation-adoption process.

> "Innovators are venturesome individuals; they desire the hazardous, the rash, the avant-garde, and the risky. Since no other model of the innovation exists in the social system, they must also have the ability to understand and use complex technical information. An occasional debacle when one of the new ideas adopted proves to be unsuccessful does not disquiet innovators. However, in order to absorb the loss of an unprofitable innovation, they must generally have control of substantial resources.[9]

Laggards are quite a different breed. They tend to be localistic - some are near isolationists - in professional views; their reference point is the past. Their primary interaction is with peers who hold traditional values like themselves. Significantly, they are suspicious of innovation, innovators, and change agents. As Rogers stated the contrast so well "While innovators look to the road of change ahead, the laggards gaze at rear-view mirrors." [10]

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p.57

[10] Ibid., p.58

Carlson's study revealed three fundamental barriers to change in the public schools: (1) absence of a change agent, (2) a weak knowledge base, and (3) domestication of the public schools.[11] The change agent's role seems to pass to the school adminstrator by default. We have few other candidates for the role in the schools and serious difficulties arise when we ask chief administrators to diagnose and prescribe for his own organizational ailments. The superintendent may desire change but (for good reason) fear the consequences. The dilemma resulting from this conflict enhances the attractiveness of inaction. The change agent should be knowledgeable about the means and ends of the specific change. This knowledge requirement is formidable to the school administrator; few are prepared to properly select, implement, evaluate and be chief apologist to the board and the community. The third barrier to change stems from the reality that schools cannot select clients and clients cannot reject the schools. The domestication process results in schools' playing the organizational game by special rules. As a protected organization, schools enjoy an artificially-contrived stability; change can be controlled to accommodate the schools adoptive capacity. The notorious lag in schools between idea development and adoption would not be tolerated in most free organizations. Buggy whip makers have nearly disappeared; schools selling "buggy whip" ideas are going strong.

The present movement toward educational innovations creates vacuums in the management of change. If we accept the reality of change, we must anticipate pressures on schools to react to it. Change will occur; perhaps the only options left open deal with the schools' response to it. Unless we are content to react to change on an ad hoc basis, we must reorder our priorities to provide for the role of change agent. Perhaps our natural

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[11] Carlson, op.cit., pp.4-6 .

response is to add the change agent's responsibility to the office of superintendent or spread it over the administrative staff. I hope we resist the impulse. Experience documents the illogic of looking to the school administrator for leadership in educational change. Few administrators enjoy the luxury of detachment from their own organization. Most administrators are painfully aware of the risks involved in innovation adoption and the total price attached to change. Note that we aren't discussing the administrator as a regulator of change but rather as a promoter, initiator, or generator of change. Administrators are crucial screens for externally-based change ideas; they do "guard the gates" and filter change in their schools. To expect them to conceive and and promote radical, revolutionary change in schools is another matter.

With the advent of teacher militancy and student activism, the opportunity for administrators to perform the role of change agents in schools probably has passed. Teacher organizations and student protest groups can afford to take the risks attached to innovation adoption; administrators cannot. Teacher organizations can assume a corporate posture apart from the school organization; administrators cannot. Teacher organizations and students can channel external pressure for change through confrontation and negotiation procedures; administrators are foreclosed from that route. Organized teachers and students have access to the school board and the school resources in ways not open to administrators. We are learning to expect (and accept) demands from teachers for basic changes in power and resource distribution. As teacher-board bargaining moves into curriculum decision-making, allocation of available resources, and the ends-means policy discussions, the opportunity to initiate and change moves from the administrators to teachers and students.

The administrator's role in the change process is not at all clear. Role conflict has been a barrier to administrators acting as change agents. The role vacancy has benefitted no one and the real or imagined status conflict between administrators and teachers in innovation adoption may yet dissolve through the negotiating process. Whether the change agent role is played by administrators, teacher organizations, or students, may not be significant. The significant event may be the occupation of the change agent's role and its impact on the management of change in schools.